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WILSON — THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PROOFREADER

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# The Importance of the Proof-reader



A Paper read before the Club of Odd Volumes,  
in Boston, by JOHN WILSON

C A M B R I D G E

JOHN WILSON & SON (INC.)  
1901



**T**HIS Paper upon “*The Importance of the Proof-reader*” is presented with the compliments of the University Press and the Author. The subject is one which the Author has endeavored to emphasize during his fifty years’ service in the printing business, and one for which the University Press has ever endeavored to stand.

1922

**J**OHN WILSON, author of this Paper and formerly proprietor of The University Press, died in 1903. His successors have now the pleasure of making a reprint, believing the subject to be of as much interest today as it was twenty years ago.



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# The Importance of the Proof-reader

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**I**N preparing a work for the press, the author, the compositor, and the proof-reader are the three factors that enter into its construction. We will, however, treat more especially of the last-named in connection with the first.

The true proof-reader should not only be a practical printer, but he should be a lover of literature, familiar with the classics of all languages, with the results accomplished by science, and indeed with every subject that concerns his fellow-men. When an author prepares a work for the press, he often uses many abbreviations, his capitalization is frequently incorrect, his spelling occasionally not in accordance either with Worcester or Webster, his punctuation inaccurate, his historical and biographical statements careless, and his chirography frequently very bad. In such cases the proof-reader is sorely tried; and unless he is a man of much patience, well versed in the art of deciphering incorrigible manuscripts, and supplying all their deficiencies, his last state will, to speak mildly, be worse than his first.

It is said that, when Charles Dudley Warner was the editor of the “Hartford Press,” back in the “sixties,” arousing the patriotism of the State with his vigorous appeals, one of the type-setters came in from the composing-room, and, planting himself before the editor, said: “Well, Mr. Warner, I’ve decided to enlist in the army.” With mingled sensations of pride and responsibility, Mr. Warner replied encouragingly that he was glad to see the man felt the call of duty. “Oh, it is n’t that,” said the truthful compositor, “but I’d rather be shot than try to set any more of your damned copy.”

As an example of what I mean by bad MS. I take the liberty of showing you one page of a work which, unfortunately, I had agreed to print. This is a sample of one half of a work of 1000 MS. pages. When the author offered me, a few years later, another work similarly prepared, I declined, with thanks, to accept it.

Another illustration of careless writing I copy from “*Harper’s Young People*” :—

A Massachusetts clergyman nearly got himself into a peck of trouble because of the bad quality of his handwriting. It was more than a century ago that he had occasion to address a letter to the General Court of Massachusetts upon some subject of great interest at that time. When the letter was received, the court ordered the clerk to read it, and were filled

July 20th 1910

Missouri

over 75 ha of grassland were 3305.37 ha  
and 1157 ha of forest.

287 ha of grassland were 4457 ha of forest.

Grass - 1157 ha 3305.37 ha 1057 ha 730 ha woodland & savanna, 3 wood, 172 ha 2304.69  
forest - 4457 ha 1157 ha 730 ha 1057 ha 3305.37 ha 1157 ha 730 ha woodland & savanna, 3 wood, 172 ha 2304.69

Forest - 1157 ha 730 ha 1057 ha 3305.37 ha 1157 ha 730 ha 1057 ha 3305.37 ha

Wood - 1157 ha 730 ha 1057 ha 3305.37 ha 1157 ha 730 ha 1057 ha 3305.37 ha

Savanna - 1157 ha 730 ha 1057 ha 3305.37 ha 1157 ha 730 ha 1057 ha 3305.37 ha

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with wrath at what appeared to be these words in opening : “ I address you not as magistrates, but as Indian devils.”

“ What ! ” they cried. “ Read that over again. How does he address us ? ”

“ Not as magistrates, but as Indian devils,” repeated the clerk. “ That ’s what he says.”

The letter was passed around, and the judges were by no means pleased to see that the clerk had apparently made no mistake. Very angry at what they believed to be an insult, the judges passed a vote of censure upon the clergyman, and wrote to him demanding an apology. He came before them in person, when it turned out that where the judges had read “ Indian devils ” he had written “ individuals,” which, of course, made an apology unnecessary ; but the reverend gentleman was admonished to improve his handwriting if he wished to keep out of trouble.

Still another case of “ blind copy ” furnished to the printer, resulted in making the title “ Pilgrim’s Progress ” to appear in “ cold type ” as “ Religious Rogues.”

The “ Philadelphia Press ” relates the following : “ Recently an editor of a morning paper wrote an article on the Boer question, and headed it, ‘ The British Army won a Victory that was Remarkable.’ To his surprise he found that the printer made it read, “ The British Army won a Victory. *That was Remark-*

*able!*’ The infuriated editor told his foreman that he must be in *sympathy* with the Boers.”

Many intelligent persons regard the duty of a proof-reader as consisting in simply following his copy and in securing the proper spelling of words. If this, however, were the sum of his accomplishments, many an author would come to grief. Recently an author, quoting the expression, “God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb,” attributed it to the Bible; but the proof-reader queried the authority and wrote in the margin, “Sterne,” which the author had the good sense gratefully to accept. Young men and women, recent graduates of colleges, have sometimes requested me to introduce them to publishers desiring to issue translations of certain books in foreign languages; but knowing how superficial often is the linguistic attainment of the college graduate, making him incapable of rendering correctly into English the spirit and the letter of a foreign tongue, I have respectfully declined. I may say, and with accuracy, that scarcely a translation is made which does not show some blunder more or less appalling.

The French word “bois” means *wood*. In a certain sentry-box several soldiers had died, and, to prevent the supposed contagion from spreading, Napoleon ordered the *bois* to be burned. The translator rendered

the word *bois* as *forest*; which would have led the reader to suppose that the whole forest was burned. The proof-reader, after consulting the French text, suggested the substitution of “sentry-box” for “forest.” The change was made, and the meaning of the original was thus restored.

A German professor, who prided himself on his knowledge not only of the classics, but of modern languages, translated the New Testament expression “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” into, “The ghost indeed is willing, but the meat is bad.” If he had said, in the light of some modern achievements, “the meat is embalmed,” he might have hit the nail on the head.

A gentleman who was in Venice when the news of the destruction of Admiral Cervera’s squadron came, and who could not make out the Italian account very well, took the paper to a certain professor who speaks almost perfect scholar’s-English, and asked him to translate it. The professor did so in excellent style until he came near the end, when, with a little hesitation, he read, “And the band played *The Flag with the Stars on it*, and *It will be very warm in the City this Evening.*” It was about a minute before the gentleman recognized the proper title of the last piece, “There ’ll be a hot Time in the old Town to-night.”

In the cases cited, and in very many others, the proof-reader has shown himself to be “a power behind the throne;” for, without his aid, innumerable errors would have occurred.

A writer on Punctuation, many years ago, said that, “Perhaps there never existed on any subject, among men of learning, a greater difference of opinion than on the *true mode* of punctuation, and scarcely can any two persons be brought to agree on the same method; some making the pause of a semicolon where the sense will only bear a comma; some contending for what is termed stiff pointing, and others altogether the reverse.” To-day, however, this variety of opinion is less chaotic; for since then several works on Punctuation have been published, showing that there are rules or laws determining the construction of sentences and aiding the reader to understand more readily the true meaning of the writer.

As you are aware, there is a great difference between grammatical and rhetorical punctuation. The former is for the eye, the latter for the ear. Leading actors, in preparing their plays for the stage, always punctuate rhetorically, to indicate to the speaker of the lines the pauses necessary for effect. The art of true punctuation is, however, founded on grammar, its aim being to assist the reader to discover the true meaning of a sentence.

To illustrate this matter of rhetorical punctuation, let me instance the expression, "No, sir." The grammatical reading is, "No, O sir," whereas the rhetorical reading is, "No sir." The expression "The Oak, one day, said to the Reed," rhetorically read, will be, "The Oak one day, said to the Reed." In the latter case, the reader makes *one day* the name of the oak, — putting the two nouns in apposition as meaning one thing. In the Lord's Prayer, it is not uncommon to see a comma after the words, *kingdom, power, and glory*; as, "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever." Rhetorically, and to give force and emphasis to each expression, a pause in reading is necessary; but, grammatically, the comma is inaccurate.

Writers sometimes, and frequently proof-readers, blunder in the proper use of the exclamations, *O* and *Oh*. The former should be used only in cases of invocation, as, "O Lord!" "O my countrymen!" — the latter in cases of emotion, as, "Oh that I had the wings of a dove, that I might fly to the uttermost parts of the earth!" — "Oh for a lodge in some vast wilderness!"

It is not, perhaps, surprising that errors in grammar should be frequently seen on signs; as, for instance, "House to Let," which should be, "House to be

Let.” A person can “Let” the house to another; but he who occupies it cannot say that he “Lets” it. Occasionally are seen on painted signs the words *Billiards*, *Groceries*, with an apostrophe before the letter *s*; and even in classic Cambridge this sign was to be seen at one time, “Students Tickets can be had here,” without the apostrophe after the letter *s* in the word *Students*. The other day, in Harvard Square, was to be seen the sign, “Students Furniture,” also without the apostrophe. Under the portrait of Admiral Dewey, during his reception in Boston, were the words, “Our Nations Hero,” without the apostrophe before the letter *s*. If authors and proof-readers occasionally nod, why should not also the people?

The colloquial inquiry, “Where do you live?” should be, “Where do you reside?” — for we live *everywhere*, but we reside only at *one place*.

A not uncommon error is made even by noted writers in the misuse of the article *a* before the word *historical*; as, “In a historical address at the observance of the centennial of Washington’s death.” We can say, “A history of,” etc., for the accent is on the *first* syllable; but in the expression, “An historical,” the accent being on the *second* syllable, good taste and euphony demand the article *an*.

Occasionally a writer will split his infinitive; as, "We were to cautiously and quickly advance to the hill above," instead of, "We were to advance cautiously and quickly to the hill above;" "You must not expect to always have things as you would like to have them," instead of, "You must not expect to have always things as you would like to have them." It is claimed by some writers, however, that it is not only correct to separate the infinitive from the verb, but that such construction adds force to the sentence; as, "*A pure heart is necessary if we wish to thoroughly enjoy the beauties of nature,*" in place of *to enjoy thoroughly*, etc.

Many errors are also made by incorrect *application* of punctuation marks; as, for instance: An auctioneer, who had a buggy for sale, placed the sign, "*Buggy! for Sale,*" on an old bedstead near his door. In a short time his attention was drawn to the blunder by the laughter of some who passed. He readily perceived his error, and promptly made the correction. Examples of this kind are countless, of which I here give a few: "Woman, without her man, is a brute," should be, "Woman,—without her, man is a brute." A child being asked, "Why should we love God?" replied, "Because He makes preserves, and redeems us," when he should have said, "Because He makes,

preserves, and redeems us." A blacksmith, passing by a barber's shop, observed in the window an imprinted placard, which he read as follows :—

"What do you think ?

I'll shave you for nothing,  
And give you some drink."

The son of Vulcan, with a huge black beard on his chin, and a little spark in his throat, accepted the invitation and entered the shop. After the operation had been duly performed, he asked for the liquor. But the shaver of beards demanded payment ; when the smith, in a stentorian voice, referred him to his own placard, which the barber very good-humoredly produced, and read thus :—

"What ! do you think

I'll shave you for nothing,  
And give you some drink ?"

Another example of the ludicrous will tend still better to show the value of correct punctuation :—

"Every lady in this land  
Hath twenty nails upon each hand ;  
Five and twenty on hands and feet.  
And this is true, without deceit."

The true meaning of the passage will at once be made clear by correct punctuation ; as, —

“ Every lady in this land  
Hath twenty nails ; upon each hand  
Five ; and twenty on hands and feet.  
And this is true, without deceit.”

The following request was once presented to a clergyman : “ A sailor going to sea, his wife desires the prayers of the congregation for his safety.” The minister, either through carelessness or short sightedness, misread the request thus : “ A sailor, going to see his wife, desires the prayers of the congregation for his safety.”

A few days since, a gentleman wrote on a slip of paper the address of a friend, namely : “ Adolph Windermeer, Jr., care of Sylvester Windsor & Co., New York. Not seeing any comma after the name “Sylvester” or “Windsor,” I inquired if “Sylvester” was the Christian name of “Windsor ;” to which he replied (marking in a comma), “ Oh, no.”

A few of the above illustrations I have taken from my father’s book on Punctuation.

While the rules governing punctuation are now generally adopted, there are a few cases where printers and proof-readers disagree. In the division of a word at the end of a line, the English prefer to divide on the vowel, as in *ha-bit, pre-face, pro-phet* ; the American, on the consonant, as *hab-it, pref-ace, proph-et*.

The former division shows the *origin* of the word; the latter, its *pronunciation*. Of the two, I prefer the English style; for instance, in the word *cre-a-tion*, of three syllables, it is better to divide on the second vowel, thus *crea-tion*, — the syllable *tion* being more easy to pronounce; and the vowel at the beginning of a line being unsightly.

It is also not uncommon, in some American books, to omit the comma after the second noun in the case of the mention of *three* nouns, as in the sentence, “Industry, honesty, and temperance are essential to happiness,” and also to omit the comma after the second name in the sign of a firm of three, as, “Little, Brown, & Co.” While in this country the omission of the comma in these instances is often made, it by no means follows that such omission is correct. Another difference from the English practice is that of omitting the comma after the given number of a street, as, “274 Washington Street.” In this case, the grammatical reason for placing the comma after the number is that there are not 274 Washington *streets*, but that the meaning is No. 274 of Washington Street.

Many authors and printers vary also in the capitalization of certain compound titles or names, as, the “Charles River,” the “river Thames,” “New York City,” the “city of Boston,” the “Blue Hills,”

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the “White Mountains,” — the words *River*, *City*, and *Mountain* beginning with a capital letter or with a small letter according to their position in the sentence.

When two nouns are jointly used, the first serving as a *qualifying* adjective to the second, a hyphen should be inserted between them. Writers and printers frequently omit the hyphen in such cases, causing an unnecessary obscurity to the reader; thus, “Colonel Baden-Powell, when in West Africa, fell in love with a native saying, ‘Softly, softly : catchee monkey !’ which, when Anglicized, is, ‘Don’t flurry : patience gains the day !’ I had some difficulty in understanding the meaning of this pleasantry till I supplied the hyphen between the two words, *native-saying*. When a compound title becomes very common, the two words coalesce, as, *cornfield*, *farmyard*, *school-house*, etc.

It is not uncommon to see the titles of books, especially in the printed catalogues of our Public Libraries, begin with a small or lower-case letter. This style is not only incorrect, but misleading, and corrupting good taste, and should not be adopted by men of letters. The reason given for it, namely, *ease in reading*, is very weak and inadequate. The plea of “good usage,” urged in many cases, is not sufficient

justification of any literary practice *in itself* incorrect and vulgar.

When phonetic spelling and writing come to take the place of our present or ideographic method, the difficulties of the proof-reader will be greatly increased. To-day it would be a difficult matter for him to spell the expression, "Uneeda Biscuit," or to decide the correct mode of printing the word "coffee," which sometimes appears as *kaughphy*. It is true that phonotypy would enable the child the more easily to master the art of spelling; but whether words meaning the same thing would be spelled alike by all writers is very questionable, as the most common words are frequently mispronounced; as, *sech* for *such*, *gud* for *good*, *git* for *get*, *gut* for *got*, etc.

With a few exceptions, the words of MS. books, to the 15th century, run on continuously without spacing; and as to punctuation, little or nothing was known. In the Greek works on papyrus before Christ, there are to be found certain marks indicating pauses, such as the wedge-shaped sign (>). In Biblical MSS., however, the division of the text into lines enabled the reader the more easily to understand the meaning, and was an assistance to him in public reading. As many blunders were made by the monks in transcribing and re-transcribing the ancient MSS., the assistance of the

corrector, or proof-reader, was as much needed then as now; the wrong words were erased with a sponge or with a knife, and the corrected words inserted. Solomon, three thousand years ago, said, "Of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh." This was uttered at a time when few read or studied, and when all books were in *manuscript*, the printer's art being then unknown. To-day everybody reads, studies, and writes; what at one time was a "weariness of the flesh" has to-day become a pleasure and a joy. Jeremy Belknap, in his Papers, says that there are four things necessary to constitute a man: "first, he should build a house; second, he should write a book; third, he should get a child; fourth, he should plant a tree."

Now, let us not only do all these things prescribed, but let us supplement them by four others, which the proof-reader thinks are just as, if not more, important; namely: let our *chirography* be readable, our *spelling* correct, our *punctuation* faultless, and our *rhetoric* such that "he who runs may read."

As members of *The Odd Volume Club*, we all love not only rare, but good books. When I enter a book-store, or more especially a large publishing house, like that for instance of Little, Brown, & Co., and behold before me row upon row of books,—"a sea of up-

turned faces," as it were,— my feelings are like those of a loving mother, who, with outstretched arms, is ever ready to embrace and press to her bosom her beloved child. I long to clasp by the hand one and all of these attractive, silent spirits, to press them to my heart, and to exclaim, in the words of Channing, "*God be thanked for books!*"

These words of Channing recall an incident in my boyhood. One night, as I was studying my lessons for the morrow, my father read to me, from Channing's *Essay on Self Culture*, the words I have quoted, which illustrate not only Channing's enthusiasm, but the power and influence of books. Let me repeat a few more lines from the passage:—

"God be thanked for books ! They are the voices of the distant and the dead, and make us heirs of the spiritual life of past ages. Books are the true levellers. They give to all who will faithfully use them the society, the spiritual presence, of the best and greatest of our race. No matter how poor I am ; no matter though the prosperous of my own time will not enter my obscure dwelling ; if the sacred writers will enter and take up their abode under my roof, — if Milton will cross my threshold to sing to me of Paradise ; and Shakespeare to open to me the worlds of imagination and the workings of the human heart ; and Franklin to enrich me with his practical wisdom, — I shall not pine for want of intellectual companion-

ship, and I may become a cultivated man, though excluded from what is called the best society in the place where I live."

Byron says that "a small drop of ink may make millions think." Many a time a book has decided the character of a man's life. A book makes friends for you ; for there springs up from its reading an acquaintanceship not only between you and the author, but between you and another man who reads the same book. Samuel Johnson, hearing that a man had read Burton's "Anatomy of Melancholy," exclaimed, "If I knew that man I could hug him." It is said that Cæsar, when shipwrecked and in danger of drowning, did not try to save his gold, but took his Commentaries between his teeth and swam to shore.

All these instances I have cited tend to prove how great is the appreciation which men of culture have for those books out of which they have drawn inspiration for their lives, or into the making of which they have put their souls ; and they all prove, also, the immense importance of the accomplished proof-reader in helping to create for us the books which we love.



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